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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SANAA 002149

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TAGS: PREL PGOV KDEM YM

SUBJECT: ELECTIONS UPDATE: DATE ANNOUNCED, CAMPAIGN SET TO BEGIN

REF: A. SANAA 1743

1B. SANAA 1914

Classified By: CDA NABEEL KHOURY, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

Summary

11. (U) After weeks of difficult negotiations and opposition threats to boycott the elections, preparations for Yemen's September 20 presidential and local council elections appear to be back on track. Over the last two weeks, Charge met with the ruling party, the opposition coalition, and election officials, encouraging all sides to participate fully in the elections process and implement the June 18 agreement on free and fair elections. Agreeing on the need for full participation, the opposition submitted names to the election commission for its representatives on the front-line supervisory committees, thus overcoming what had been a serious impediment to moving preparations forward. On July 25, Parliament and the Shura Council approved five presidential candidates, including President Saleh and the opposition coalition candidate, Faisal bin Shamlan. On July 26, the ROYG announced that elections would be held on September 20.

12. (U) For the moment, the political atmosphere remains calm, as all sides appear to be committed to moving the process forward. Some issues remain to be resolved, however, including a voter registration list riddled with fraudulent entries and opposition access to government-owned media. While the political climate is improving, international elections experts fear that Yemen may not be technically prepared to hold the September elections. A MEPI-sponsored technical assessment scheduled to be completed in the next several weeks should provide Post with a better idea of the election commission's preparedness. A smooth elections process will be particularly crucial for the local council elections which, unlike the presidential contest, will likely produce competitive races and therefore a greater risk for violence, especially if the elections are not well-organized.
End Summary.

GPC-JMP Agreement: Problems with Implementation

13. (U) On June 18, the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) party and the opposition coalition Joint Meeting Party (JMP) signed a joint-statement of principles on conducting

free and fair elections (ref A). The parties agreed to: 1) add two additional JMP members to the Supreme Commission for Elections and Referendum (SCER); 2) divide the seats on supervisory election committees between the GPC (54 percent) and the JMP (46 percent); 3) create a legal team endorsed by the SCER to examine the voter registration list; and 4) grant equal access to government-controlled media outlets.

JMP: We Want Results

¶4. (C) During a July 16 meeting with Charge, JMP representatives complained that the GPC "was not serious" about implementing the agreement and was "playing games with time." The largest coalition member, Islah, asserted that not one provision of the agreement had been fully implemented. While Parliament had amended the election law to expand SCER membership, the two new JMP representatives had not been given any responsibilities. He also noted that a legal team had been formed to review the voter rolls, but no progress had been made on removing the hundreds of thousands of suspected fraudulent names, including duplicates and children. The JMP also complained that President Saleh was "using the official media as a weapon" against the opposition. General Secretary for the Yemeni Socialist Party, Yasin Noman, stressed that the JMP "was serious" about participating in the elections but feared that the GPC would try to "push us towards a boycott" by not implementing the agreement. Until the agreement was implemented, he continued, the JMP would not provide names to the SCER for the supervisory committees.

¶5. (C) Charge encouraged the opposition to commit fully to

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the elections process and find ways to resolve their differences with the GPC, saying the Yemeni people deserved a free and fair election and an open debate of real issues. He suggested that they bring specific suggestions to the GPC on how to implement the June 18 agreement. The JMP representatives agreed that they wanted the following before committing to full participation in the September elections: 1) A review of the 250,000 names from the voter registration list SCER already referred to the courts under suspicion of fraud, to determine that opposition voters were not singled-out, 2) Equal access to government-owned media and a published schedule of elections coverage, and 3) Assignment of meaningful portfolios to the two new JMP SCER members. They added that any support the Charge could provide in mediating with the GPC and the government would be appreciated.

GPC: We're Willing to Find Common Ground

¶6. (C) During a July 23 meeting with Deputy GPC Secretary Abdul-Rahman al-Akwa, Charge relayed the opposition's points and encouraged the GPC to work towards a political solution. Akwa replied that the ruling party was generally in favor of the proposed ideas, adding that the SCER had already granted the two new JMP members the choice portfolios of Security and External Relations. In principle, he explained, the GPC was in favor of reviewing the voter registration list, but stressed that it must be done within a "legal framework." Akwa said the party supported equal media access, but commented that the Yemeni people "were not ready" for a free exchange of ideas in the media. Akwa ended up agreeing to Charge's suggestion that a campaign media schedule be posted by the SCER to demonstrate at the outset that all candidates would have an equal chance to air their views and platforms.

¶7. (C) Lastly, Akwa complained that every time the GPC strikes an agreement with the opposition, the JMP makes

additional demands, saying "they only want power, not reform." Charge encouraged the GPC to keep working on a political solution, saying it was to Yemen's advantage to have both parties fully commit to the democratic process.

SCER: Finding Creative Solutions

¶18. (C) On July 24, Charge met with SCER Chairman Khalid al-Sharif to discuss the three point plan put forward by the opposition. Sharif viewed the plan positively and said the SCER would support the parties' efforts "within the legal framework." He noted that the parties already seemed to be moving the process forward, as the JMP had finally submitted their names for the supervisory committees. Sharif explained a "creative solution" SCER found to divide the chairmanship of the committees between the parties, as both wanted to dominate the major population centers. SCER wrote down all the contested committees and alternated the chairmanship between the parties one by one down the list. The other two seats on the three-person committee were then given to the party not receiving the chairmanship.

¶19. (C) Sharif agreed that the voter registration list was flawed, but said the SCER had already referred 250,000 names to the courts on criminal charges of fraud. Those names were now with the local courts, he claimed, to investigate the charges. Sharif added that the SCER was trying to clean up the entire computerized voter registration list, which was compiled with help from the UNDP and includes photos for all applicants. Sharif inadvertently demonstrated how flawed the voter lists are when he showed Charge an example of a list compiled for a specific district. From the photos, Charge could clearly see that a number of the registered voters were under the legal voting age of eighteen. Charge informed Sharif that international election experts from NDI, IFES, and UNDP stood ready to assist the SCER and political party representatives to review the list in a transparent manner. (Comment: NDI, IFES, and UNDP agree that the voter registration list cannot be fully "cleaned" of fraudulent entries in time for the election. They do believe, however, a representative sample could be reviewed in-time and would be a good confidence building measure. End Comment).

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Presidential Candidates Named

¶10. (U) On July 25, in a joint-session of Parliament, the GPC-dominated House of Representatives and the Shura Council voted to approve five presidential candidates from a list of 46 hopefuls. Each member was allowed to vote for one candidate. Saleh led the voting with 237 votes out of 378, with opposition candidate bin Shamlan receiving 51 votes. The other three chosen were Ahmed al-Majidi (YSP), Fathi al-Azab (Islah), and Yassin Abdu Saeed (the pro-government National Council for Opposition). All are relative unknowns and will run as independent candidates, despite their party affiliations (additional information on candidates will be reported septel).

Comment

¶11. (C) The GPC and JMP's apparent commitment to full-participation is a step forward for Yemen's second presidential elections. For the elections process to continue smoothly, both parties must remain engaged and the SCER must stay flexible on resolving disputes. With a set date and the issue of elections committees settled, the SCER can now focus on preparing for election day. Unresolved issues such as the flawed voter registration list and

continued government domination of television and radio outlets, however, leaves open the possibility of continued problems. Post will encourage all sides to use NDI, IFES, and UNDP experts already in-country to find technically and politically feasible solutions to the remaining roadblocks.

¶112. (C) It is now time for the parties to start focusing on the campaigns. While Saleh will undoubtedly win a second seven-year term, the opposition still has an opportunity to use its national campaign to focus on real issues and generate support for its local council candidates.

Unfortunately, neither party has so far demonstrated a clear strategy for the local council elections (septel). Post will continue to stress the importance of local council elections for Yemen's democratic development and encourage the parties to put the choice before the voters, rather than rely on political manipulation come election day.

Khoury